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ABSTRACT

This brief suggests that Universities of the Third Age (U3As) provide learning opportunities for older adults. Worldwide, they typically take one of two forms. Based on the first U3A founded in 1973, the French model is university based and offers mostly formal courses. Arising in Cambridge in 1981, the British model emphasizes informal, autonomous self-help groups in which the instructors are usually third-agers themselves. In the United States and Canada, the term U3A is virtually unknown, but the form exists as Institutes of Learning in Retirement (ILRs), begun in 1962. Most of the more than 200 ILRs are linked by the Elderhostel Learning Network. They are community based and often conducted by members; many are affiliated with colleges and universities. Issues that U3As/ILRs must address to sustain their momentum into the 21st century include the following: broadening participation to more diverse groups of elders; exploiting the networking possibilities of the World Wide Web; addressing the intergenerational imperative by encouraging reflection on life experiences and integration of self; and fostering research on aging by third-age participants themselves. (Contains 19 annotations of print resources and contact information for 5 organizational resources.) (YLB)

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Universities of the Third Age: Learning in Retirement Trends and Issues Alert No. 2

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT NO. 2

1999

Universities of the Third Age: Learning in Retirement

Universities of the Third Age (U3As) provide learning opportunities for older adults who are largely free of work and family responsibilities. Worldwide, they typically take one of two forms (Swindell 1997): the French model (based on the first U3A founded in 1973) is university based and offers mostly formal courses; the British model, arising in Cambridge in 1981, emphasizes informal, autonomous self-help groups in which the instructors are usually third-agers themselves, not college professors. In the United States and Canada, the term U3A is virtually unknown, but the form exists as Institutes of Learning in Retirement (ILRs), begun in 1962. Most of the more than 200 ILRs are linked by the Elderhostel Learning Network (Young 1996). Like the British model, ILRs are community based and often member conducted; like the French model, many are affiliated with colleges and universities (Swindell 1995).

That U3As/ILRs are a growing phenomenon reflects the demographic trend of more people living longer, healthier lives. They also reflect several educational trends: participation is strongly linked to prior education (ibid.); they are communities of learners without distinctions between teachers and learners (Cairns 1995; Williamson 1995); and the global networking made possible by the Internet is enabling the participation of homebound, frail, or geographically isolated elders (Swindell and Vassella 1997).

U3As/ILRs are at the intersection of educational funding and policy debates. The current rhetoric of lifelong learning and the "Learning Society" too often means a narrower emphasis on learning to improve work skills and economic productivity (Williamson 1997). This vocational emphasis is less appropriate and overly constraining for third-age learners. At the same time, competition for limited educational and social services monies fuels stereotypes of an aging population as a drain on society (Swindell 1997). However, learning-in-retirement programs can demonstrate how they improve and prolong quality of life, making the case for funding programs that support self-sufficiency and increased well-being, thus freeing social services money for the neediest individuals (Swindell 1991, 1997).

Issues that U3As/ILRs must address to sustain their momentum into the 21st century include (1) broadening participation to more diverse groups of elders (Swindell 1997); (2) exploiting the networking possibilities of the World Wide Web (ibid.); (3) addressing the intergenerational imperative by encouraging reflection on life experiences and integration of self (Williamson 1997); and (4) fostering research on aging by third-age participants themselves (Bynum and Seaman 1993; Lemieux 1995).

Print Resources

Bynum, L. L., and Seaman, M. A. "Motivations of Third-Age Students in Learning-in-Retirement Institutes." *Continuing Higher Education Review* 57, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1993): 12-22. (EJ 478 847)

A profile of 452 older adults enrolled in Learning-in-Retirement institutes showed they had relatively high economic status and extensive educational background. They were motivated by self-actualization, perceived cognitive gaps, intellectual curiosity, and social contact. An intellectually stimulating curriculum is a pivotal factor in predicting program success and appeal.

Cairns, H. "The University of the Third Age." In *One World, Many Cultures. Papers from the 4th International Conference on Adult Education and the Arts (St. Andrews, Scotland, July 10-14, 1995)*, edited by D. Jones, B. McConnell, and G. Normie, pp. 57-60. Cardenden, Scotland: Fife Regional Council, 1996. (ED 414 470)

Describes the structure of U3As in Britain and their umbrella organization, the Third Age Trust. Emphasizes the self-help, informal nature of the study groups.

Clark, F.; Heller, A.F.; Rafman, C.; and Walker, J. "Peer Learning: A Popular Model for Seniors Education." *Educational Gerontology* 23, no. 8 (December 1997): 751-762. (EJ 554 974)

A survey of participants in an Institute for Learning in Retirement revealed the strengths of peer learning. The Internet has the potential to expand participation to those with limited mobility.

Eyland, A. "Learning and Traveling in the Third Age." In *Residential Adult Education: Trends and Prospects. Discussion in Continuing Education, No. 3*, edited by J. Field and G. Normie, pp. 47-56. Coventry, England: Dept. of Continuing Education, University of Warwick, 1992. (ED 351 540)

Describes the Australian College for Seniors, in which Elderhostel members from the United States participate.

Fischer, R. B.; Blazey, M. L.; and Lipman, H. T. *Students of the Third Age*. Riverside, NJ: Macmillan, 1992.

This handbook presents the history of Learning-in-Retirement programs and explains how to start and operate a member-driven ILR.

Lemieux, A. "The University of the Third Age: Role of Senior Citizens." *Educational Gerontology* 21, no. 4 (June 1995): 337-344. (EJ 507 725)

Universities of the Third Age are developing the research facet of their mission. In this model, the senior citizen is both the object and the agent of research, being involved in action research that transforms their subjective impressions and intuitions into objective knowledge with which to transform their environment.

Martin, D.M., and Lyday, J. "Feelings of Loyalty among Members of Learning-in-Retirement Programs." *Educational Gerontology* 23, no. 4 (June 1997): 315-327. (EJ 545 548)

Makes the case for higher education institutions' involvement in education for older adults on various levels: economic, social, and institutional.

Minichiello, V. "Meeting the Educational Needs of an Aging Population: The Australian Experience." *International Review of Education* 38, no. 4 (July 1992): 403-416. (EJ 458 035)

Reviews data on the rapid growth of the older population in Australia. Describes the aims and content of gerontological education, highlighting the importance of destroying myths. Describes the educa-

tional opportunities available for older people, exploring the University of the Third Age model.

Percy, K. , Ed. ***Working and Learning Together. European Initiatives with Older People.*** Guildford, England: Association for Educational Gerontology, 1993. (ED 368 966)

Compares the French and British models of U3A and describes the hybrid form at the University of Vicenza, Italy.

Swindell, R., ed. ***Positive Ageing. Proceedings of the 1st NSW U3A Conference.*** Orange, Australia: Orange University of the Third Age, 1991. (ED 335 515)

Contains nine theme papers illustrating the contribution of U3As to positive and healthy aging.

Swindell, R. "An International Perspective of U3A and the Prospect for Developments in Australasia in the Years Ahead." Paper presented at the U3A Canberra Conference, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia, April 26-28, 1995. (ED 382 863)

Highlights the burgeoning popularity of U3As in Australia and New Zealand. Addresses the benefits of forming networks of U3As for information exchange and constituency research.

Swindell, R. "U3As in Australia and New Zealand: Their Value to the Wider Community, and New Directions for Future Developments." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 16, no. 6 (November-December 1997): 474-490. (EJ 554 922)

Universities of the Third Age contribute both to individual well-being and national economies. One new direction is electronic networking and the World Wide Web. Although expensive to implement, this would have the potential of reaching even greater numbers of the aging population.

Swindell, R., and Thompson, J. "An International Perspective on the University of the Third Age." ***Educational Gerontology*** 21, no. 5 (July-August 1995): 429-447. (EJ 507 779)

Universities of the Third Age (U3As) are in many countries; most follow either the French model of close association with traditional university systems or the British model of "self-help" institutions. Communication between U3As within nations and across nations is limited, and an influential coordinating body is needed.

Swindell, R., and Vassella, K. ***U3As in Australia and New Zealand: Society's Four Million-Dollar Bonanza.*** Nathan, Australia: Griffith University, 1997. (ED 414 460)

Using data collected from 146 U3As in Australia and New Zealand, researchers estimated the economic value of the U3A movement to exceed $4 million in the region.

Swindell, R.; James, C.; and Mann, M. ***A Study of Teleconferencing as a Medium for Improving the Quality of Life of the Frail Elderly.*** Nathan, Australia: Griffith University, 1992. (ED 346 310)

Research findings revealing improved quality of life for frail homebound older adults support the use of teleconferencing and Internet-based activities in U3As.

Townsend, T., and Cowdell, J., eds. ***Partnerships in Education. A Collection of Papers Presented at the 1st International Community Education Association (ICEA) Conference, Melbourne, Australia, September 26-29, 1988.*** Clayton, Australia: Monash University, 1988. (ED 333 234)

Includes "The University of the Third Age: Playpen for the Oldies or New Community Force?" (L. Claydon), pp. 243-255; "Universities of the Third Age: An Exercise in Partnership" (C. Picton) p. 256-363.

Williamson, A. "The University of the Third Age (U3A) Movement and Its Rise in New South Wales: In the Great Tradition of Liberal Adult Education?" 1995. (ED 391 070)

Presents a brief history of U3As and raises issues about how they can retain their momentum into the next century.

Williamson, A. "'You're Never Too Old to Learn!': Third-Age Perspectives on Lifelong Learning." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 16, no. 3 (May-June 1997): 173-184. (EJ 545 553)

Definitions of lifelong learning barely mention the Third Age (over age 65). Interviews with University of the Third Age participants in Sydney, Australia, reveal perspectives on life and learning that should be incorporated into programs that are age integrated and prepare people at all life stages to be custodians of the past and trustees of the future.

Young, K. E. "Rediscovering the Joy of Learning." ***AAHE Bulletin,*** December 1996. <http://www.aahe.org/bulletin/bulldec2.htm>

Retirement-age students are not the traditional demographic for higher education but through programs such as ILRs, they can make positive contributions to the campus and society.

Organizational Resources

Elderhostel Institute Network, 75 Federal St., Boston, MA 02110; 617/422-0784; fax: 617/426-0549; e-mail: network@ elderhostel.org; http://www.elderhostel.org

International Association of Universities of the Third Age, Sentier du Goria 8-10, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium B-1348.

Third Age Learning International Studies, Institut des Langues, Université des Sciences Sociales, Place Anatole France, Toulouse Cedex France F-31042.

Third Age Trust, 26 Harrison St., London WC1H 8JG, United Kingdom; e-mail: national.office@u3a.org.uk; http://www.u3a.org.uk

University of the Third Age Harrow: http://www.limedene.demon.co.uk/u3a_sites.html (an international list of U3As)

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